

STEM IMMIGRATION REFORM HELPS RETAIN TECHNICAL TALENT



In a recent study, the Pew Research Center's recent had concluded that there were more Asians than Latinos coming to the country. The basic difference however, is that the Latinos are mostly laborers, whilst the Asians, many of them of Indian, Bangladeshi, and Chinese descent are highly skilled workers, who meet the qualifications for H-1B professional nonimmigrant visas. Highly skilled employees are in huge demand, but unfortunately most employers are finding it increasingly difficult to sponsor their employees for H-1B visa. This is primarily owing to the progressively more comprehensive review of such applications by the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The USCIS has strengthened its scrutiny of such applications because it grants its holder the ability to have "dual intent." In spite of the visa being temporary, it affords the visa holder the option of applying for permanent residence in the country. However, immigration lawyers are using certain measures to circumvent these limitations to ensure that foreign students find employer-sponsored employment so as to qualify and apply for the H-1B. Two bills were recently introduced in the US Senate. The intent was to retain technical talent without opening a free-for-all immigration gate. The first bill called the STAR Act would permit STEM graduates studying in institutions that receive a minimum of \$5 million in federal research grants, to ask for permanent residency without increasing the overall number of so-called green cards issued each year. The second bill, called the SMART Jobs Act, would create a new visa category for students pursuing graduate STEM degrees and provide them with a direct route to a green card once they have found a job. They would not be impacted by the current immigration ceiling, meaning a likely increase in the overall number of immigrants allowed to stay in the country. "These immigrants are job creators," notes Kasey Pipes, a spokesman for a coalition, called Compete America. "And while we're not taking sides, both bills are asking the right question: How do we keep more skilled foreign students in the country after they graduate?" F-1 student visa holding foreign students pursuing Bachelor's degree or higher studies in science, technology or math (STEM) are eligible for one year of post-completion work-related training (Optional Practical Training, or OPT) to obtain work authorization and gain experience-based training in their field of endeavor with an American employer. There are other courses of study available to such students, with the prime benefit being that it gives them significantly more time in the U.S. in authorized on-the-job training work. This extra time assists foreign STEM, students to apply for and assess longer-term job offers and gain a better grip in a career in the United States. The additional time, also provides local employers with the opportunity of applying for H-1B, well in advance, for the cap on it gets filled earlier than a few years ago. This year too, many employers were left twiddling their thumbs, as the cap was exhausted before they could even apply for them. The Department of Homeland Security, by expanding the program to include 90 additional STEM fields of study in disciplines spanning from archeology to zoology, has further expanded option boundaries. Census figures reveal that more than 20 percent of bachelor's degree holders who earned their degrees in "science and engineering fields" are non-Americans, most of them are Asians. Most jobs relevant to science and engineering fields go to foreign-born Asian students. The Department of Commerce studies also show that that one in five workers in a STEM-related field is foreign-born, of which 63 percent comes from Asia. There is little doubt that the opening out of the STEM program and the influx of highly skilled Asian immigrants bodes well for the country. The high profile achievements of outstanding individuals like Indra Nooyi of PepsiCo and Jerry Yang of Yahoo, make for celebrity reading but the huge economic and cultural contributions, countless faceless Asian immigrants make to the country, cannot be calculated in tangible terms. They have been trained in the finest colleges and universities within the country, have spent time here and are well aware of the country's value and culture. It would be a pity if we lose their training and expertise to legislation that does not permit them to work here. The expansion of STEM allows, these full-of-potential youth, to apply their knowledge in this country so that we can take full advantage of our increasingly science- and technology-based economy.